

"IN WHAT DO WE PLACE OUR TRUST?"

by Geoffrey R Usher

Sermon delivered to the Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship on 6 May 2018

Robert A Storer served two long ministries in Massachusetts in the second half of last century. He visited Sydney in 1982 and preached in the Sydney Unitarian Church, and then in 1985 I stayed with him at the start of my speaking tour of Unitarian Universalist churches across America. I want to start by reading a piece entitled "Trust" which is in Robert's little anthology Prayer Thoughts:

May we learn to trust in the things we see about us each day.

In simple acts of goodness, in kind and gentle words, in ways we gladly help one another.

May we learn to trust in people,

In those with whom we disagree,

In those who want from life something quite different from what we desire.

In those who cannot possibly see things our way.

May we learn to trust in the underlying rightness of people's motives.

Remove from us any suspicion or fear that another person deliberately wishes to injure us.

Let us learn to trust in the important things,

The things that are precious in our lives,

The daily friendly contacts,

The ability to laugh away tension, to drive away our fears.

Let us rejoice in friends who believe in us even when we act rashly and blindly, who stand by us even when they cannot defend all that we do or say.

Enable us through the strengthening power of this communion so to live on this earth that we will strive to increase moments of beauty, to enlarge the happiness of others, to strengthen the bonds of human fellowship, to extend the areas of peaceful living on this earth, to trust that all can be well with us and others when we give life and motion to our trust.

In what do we place our trust?

If you were to ask people in almost any church congregation that question, deep-rooted convention would ensure the answer: We place our trust in God.

This is a satisfactory response if "God" is accepted as being an open enough term to include the things in which we actually do put our trust, and accepted as being restricted enough to allow us to dismiss things we do not trust at all.

But there's a problem. When people ask the question, "Do you believe in God?" they usually mean: "Do you believe in my God?" "Do you believe in what I understand to be God?" And usually, if we are to be truthful, the only reply we as Unitarians can give must be: "Probably not."

Whatever "God" may be, our human conjectures about him/her/it are only that: human conjectures, human images, human metaphors.

Regardless of what the writer of the first Psalm thought: with respect to human hypotheses about God, no matter how logically sturdy or poetically winsome, it is almost impossible for an atheist to be wrong.

In what do we place our trust?

Scholars believe that, in early Hebrew script, which had no vowels, the archaic and unutterable holy Name was rendered as JHVH, a word that, in later piety, would not be spoken aloud. It would not be spoken aloud, because to name God would be presumptuous: it would presume to make the deity subject to human command!

The Hebrew tradition was not the only one to see that reach of reality in non-subservient dimensions. The very notion of *holiness* breathes the air; and yet nothing human is free of human connections. The mystery of God (whatever may be the name of God) seems to be inseparable from the mysterious IS-WHAT-IT-ISness of Being. "I am what I am." BEING itself is the imponderable necessity for our being; and BEING itself is the presupposition of all philosophical or theological discourse about it.

In what do we place our trust?

Perhaps, whether we know it or not, our deepest trust lies in the fact – the inexplicable but indispensable fact – that we are here. We are here in a universe which contains us in the very moment we are imaging it, and in the very moment we think that, through our imagery, we contain it.

So: The atheist is always right; the gods of our imaging are creatures of our imaging. It doesn't matter how hard we strive to capture the inexpressible; mystery always bursts free of our net.

And yet, in a paradoxical way, while the atheist is always right, he/she is also always wrong. The inexpressible has not disappeared; it has simply escaped. The mystery of being remains.

The mystery of being. That mystery contains:

not merely emptiness but fullness; not
merely death but life;
not merely noise but tranquility;
not merely silence but a song;
not merely unknowing but knowing;
not merely indifference but caring;
not merely fear but courage;
not merely failure but achievement;
not merely fault but forgiveness; not
merely pain but ecstasy;
not merely selfhood but companionship;
not merely rivalry but helpfulness;
not merely the bloodstained jungle of tooth and claw but the City of God
where children walk safely, and where no-one need fear the moment
a back is turned.

What did Kahlil Gibran write, in The Prophet?

All these things have you said of beauty,
Yet in truth you spoke not of her but of needs unsatisfied,
And beauty is not a need but an ecstasy.
It is not a mouth thirsting nor an empty hand stretched forth,
But rather a heart inflamed and a soul enchanted.
It is not the image you would see nor the song you would hear,
But rather an image you see though you lose your eyes and a song you hear
though you shut your ears.
It is not the sap within the furrowed bark, nor a wing attached to a claw,
But rather a garden for ever in bloom and a flock of angels for ever in flight.

Beauty is life when life unveils her holy face.
But you are life and you are the veil.
Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.
But you are eternity and you are the mirror.

In what do we place our trust?

I suggest that we place it in the mystery which holds all these possibilities; the mystery which underwrites these possibilities as truly realisable, even if only partly so. Our own lives — our complex human lives — stand as tangible witness that all the possibilities are realisable within the mystery of being.

In what do we place our trust?

In the inner dialogue of choosing which possibilities we shall serve: those which build, or those which destroy?

In what do we place our trust?

In what Howard Thurman once called "The Sound of the Authentic". In the call to care for one another, and to care for our numberless companions here on this earth during the tenure of our days. In the rightness of honouring those who have made choices like this before us. In the grace of blessing those who will follow us.

May we learn to trust in the things which we see about us each day, in simple acts of goodness, in kind and gentle words, in ways we gladly help one another. May we learn to trust in people. May we learn to trust in those people with whom we disagree; in those who want from life something different from what we want; in those who do not — cannot — see things our way. May we learn to trust in people's motives, and move away from suspicion or fear. May we learn to trust in things that are really important; our daily contact with family and friends; the ability to laugh away tension, to overcome fears. May we learn to rejoice in the friends who believe in us even when we act rashly or foolishly; the friends who will stand by us even when they do not agree with what we say or do.